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IS THERE ANYBODY WHO REALLY WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER? THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MORTALITY

To the Memory of Burt

There was no such person before and never will be again; God will not repeat this. Other people will surely come; a world that will never grow weary, and there will be brought forth many different persons, maybe better, maybe worse, but never, never – the same (J. Michelet, epitaph for the Duke of Orleans).¹

Introduction: the curse of immortality

From ancient times many philosophers have considered the question of whether it is a bad thing to die. In this essay I would like to concentrate on the question, of *whether it would be a good thing not to die*. The idea of achieving immortality has been present in human speculation since the dawn of history. Furthermore, this dream has resurfaced not only in the idle speculation of humans but also in scientific research. Alchemists who put all their effort into finding the elixir of immortality have been replaced in our times by scientists who aim at creating a *brave new world* where people would be able to fully control the act of human birth and death by scientific methods. However, is immortality really something worth desiring?

I think that the average person would answer negatively to the question given in the title of the essay. We can find some vivid depictions which illustrate our fear of a never ending life in literature, where writers such as George Bernard Shaw or Jonathan Swift present the tragedy of the impossibility of finding death. One of the most moving illustrations of the problem comes from *The Makropulos Case*

¹ J. Michelet, *Historie de France. Le Moyen Age*, R. Laffont, Paris 1981, p. 629 (I quote after A. Finkielkraut, *Zagubione człowieczeństwo. Esej o XX wieku (L'Humanité Perdue. Essai sur le XX^e siècle)*, M. Fabianowski (trans.), Warszawa 1999, p. 86).

(*Affair*) (first published in 1922) – a play written by the Czech writer Karel Čapek which was turned into an opera by the Czech composer Leoš Janáček.² This is the tragic story of Elina Makropulos (allias Elina Marty or Ellian MacGregor), a famous opera singer who was born in 1585 and died in 1922 at the age of 337. She was the daughter of the alchemist Hieronymus, who lived in Prague at the end of the 16th century at the court of Emperor Rudolf II. Emperor Rudolf craved fanatically to become immortal and spent lots of his wealth and power on searching for a magic formula which could make it possible. He engaged hundreds of alchemists and physicians, with Hieronymus, Elina's father, among them, to realize this aim. Finally, Hieronymus invented a potion that would extend life by three centuries but Rudolf, who was very suspicious and wanted to be sure that this elixir was not poison, ordered him to test it on his daughter Elina. She fell into a coma and Hieronymus was sent to prison. However, after a week Elina awoke and fled with the formula, starting a new, extremely long life. She travelled around the world and became one of the best singers of all time yet her life became so long that it lost its meaning for her. After 300 years of intensive living, she could not love any more, feel or enjoy anything – she had experienced so much that everything became boring for her and she became completely indifferent about life. After 300 years, when she needed to take the elixir again to survive another 300 years, she refused to do so saying: "Life should not last too long – that way it keeps its value". After she died, nobody wanted to take the magic formula and try themselves and thus it was destroyed forever.

A very similar example of the curse of mortality is given in a fascinating short story *The Immortal* written by Jorge Luis Borges. The hero of the story undertook many attempts to find the immortal city with the river that guarantees immortality to each of those who drink water from it. However, when he achieved immortality, it turned out that his life became a frustrating torture deprived of any sense. Just as with the 300 year old Elina, the immortal hero of the story found boredom and real tragedy in a life that lasts so long that you can experience everything. A life that cannot end lost its meaning for the hero who spent ages searching for another river with water that would bring him back mortality.

The stories presented above tells us one very important thing – that death is a significant part of the human condition without which we cannot fully understand a human being – her life, passions and desires. I would like to consider what makes death so significant in understanding ourselves. I shall argue that death gives sense and meaning to our life or as Vladimir Jankélévitch says: "Death is nonsense that gives sense to life."³ Such an idea seems to be especially important to discuss in our times when both the sense of death and the sense of the lives of humans seems to be being undermined.

² See an inspiring philosophical essay written on this topic by Bernard Williams *The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality* [in:] *Ile wolności powinna mieć wola i inne eseje z filozofii moralnej* (*How Much Freedom Should the Will Have and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*), T. Baszniak (trans.), ALETHEIA, Warszawa 1999, pp. 43–64.

³ V. Jankélévitch, *To co nieuchronne. Rozmowy o śmierci* (*Penser la Mort?*), M. Kwaterko (trans.), PIW, Warszawa 2005, p. 35.

The sense and meaning of death

People are not only mortal, they are also conscious that they are mortal and it makes a significant difference in the way they understand and experience their lives. In talking about death we can have in mind three different meanings of death – “death in the third person” (the death of other, known or unknown people), “death in the second person” (death of our loved ones) and “death in the first person” (our death).⁴ Only in the first two situations can we consider the experience of death. However, it is a completely different experience in both of them since the death of loved ones is connected with one of the deepest tragedies in our life – the feeling of their absence which is the feeling of emptiness that cannot ever be filled in any way.⁵ As Simone Weil says, “Among human beings, only the existence of those we love is fully recognized,”⁶ thus the death of those we love can be fully experienced. We cannot experience our own death since “when we exist death is not, and when death exists, we are not any more”⁷ as the famous statement of Epicurus says. Since we do not know anything about existence before or after death, it is more accurate to say that we cannot experience death because to experience something means for us to be alive, as Ludwig Wittgenstein points out in saying: “Der Tod ist kein Ereignis des Lebens. Den Tod erlebt man nicht.”⁸ It means that the only experience of death we have is the experience of losing other people, not our own life. Losing somebody who is especially important and close to us can bring a significant change to our life or can even deprive our life of its subjective value to us, but our life will still be continued. We can ask whether the only tragedy of death is the loss of other people. One may argue that the 337 old Elina could have been happy if all of the other people she cared about had not died before her. However, the main point of the novel is actually that Elina lived so long that she lost the ability to love, not only her loved ones. If it were the latter situation, her case would not be so different from the many other cases of people deprived of the will of life because of the loss of somebody important to them. If the only tragedy of death would be the loss of somebody else, not the loss of life itself, the death of people who have nobody to care about them would not be a tragedy at all – and yet it is the case that each death is a tragedy.

To understand the tragic phenomena of death better, it could be useful to provide, after Józef Tischner, a distinction between the sense of death and the meaning of death. By a *sense of death* one understands an objective, common to all experience of its irrationality and its tragedy. By a *meaning of death*, on the other hand, one understands a subjective value to death. A sense of death speci-

⁴ V. Jankélévitch, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

⁵ About this devastating feeling of emptiness wrote Tischner (J. Tischner, *Świat ludzkiej nadziei* (*The World of Human Hope*), Znak, Kraków 1994, p. 274 ff.).

⁶ S. Weil, *An Anthology*, S. Miles (ed.), New York 1986, p. 271.

⁷ Diogenes Laertios (Laërtius), *Żywoty i poglądy słynnych filozofów* (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*), Warszawa 1984, p. 645.

⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*, Frankfurt a. Main 2003, 6.4311, p. 109, in English translation: “Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death” (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-h/5740-h.htm>).

fies a scope of possible meanings that can be given to a particular death which can be seen as heroic for instance (you can give special meaning to your death by sacrificing your life for life of others or for something more valuable than life, e.g. honour, friendship, homeland etc).⁹ "Death (...) as everything that is irrational requires rationalization. A primary rationalization of death can be made by a metaphysical settlement. A secondary rationalization one makes by giving death a meaning", as Tischner wrote.¹⁰ Both kinds of rationalization are aimed at overcoming the anxiety and fear of death that people experience.

To be afraid of death can mean three different things: (1) to be afraid of something; (2) to be afraid of something unknown; (3) to be afraid of non-being. These three different feelings can be expressed by three different notions: fear, anxiety and despair that should be distinguished. Fear and anxiety can have the same origins, but they are not the same, as Paul Tillich writes.¹¹ *Fear* always has a concrete, specified subject that can be analyzed and challenged. *Anxiety*, by contrast, has no specified subject, thus someone who experiences it remains helpless. Fear can be stimulating, it can give power to the one who experiences it – when we are faced with a lion that can eat us, our organism produces adrenaline and we can run as fast as we never could in other circumstances. Anxiety, on the other hand, can be paralyzing and can overpower the one who experiences it – when we feel anxious but we do not know the subject of our anxiety we do not know how to react, we are disoriented, we feel trapped, we do not move since we do not know where the danger might be. Trying to overcome anxiety we try to specify its subject in order to either transform anxiety into fear or to eliminate both when the specified subject turns out not to be frightening. The anxiety which cannot be transformed into fear or reduced can bring about *despair*. One experiences despair not when the subject is unknown, but when there is no subject. Despair is the highest level of anxiety and occurs when the only subject of anxiety is anxiety itself.

Taking into account this distinction, we can say that people can have fear of some kind of death or of some of the circumstances of death. For instance, one can have fear of painful death or a fear of agony which lasts half a year yet we cannot have fear of death itself. This is what Epicurus has in mind in telling us that we cannot be afraid of death since we are no more when it comes, meaning that we cannot experience and feel death by ourselves. Much more significant is that we can also have a fear of some of the consequences of death. For instance, one can have fear of an early death which makes it impossible to pursue her plans and to complete her projects. One can consider death to be an evil because of what it deprives us of (because it brings to an end all the goods that life contains), as Thomas Nagel argues.¹² In such a situation we are not afraid of the experience of dying or of being dead, but we are rather afraid of having no more experience. One understands here by death an impossibility of continuing life. The fact that

⁹ J. Tischner, *op.cit.*, p. 270 ff.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 282.

¹¹ P. Tillich, *Męstwo bycia (The Courage to Be)*, H. Bednarek (trans.), Poznań 1994, p. 42 ff.

¹² T. Nagel, *Death [in:] Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press 2008, p. 1. See also J. Malczewski, *O prywatnej koncepcji zła śmierci (On Private Conception of Evil of Death)*, "Diametros" 11 (March 2007), pp. 1–9.

“his life is over and there will never be any more of it”¹³ can be seen as a severe misfortune. Some can argue that an early death is a greater misfortune than the death of an old person, because the former deprives its subject of more goods (more possibilities of experience) than the latter. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, a famous Italian composer, violinist and organist, author of one of the most touching Stabat Mater’s ever written, died at the age of 26. His death can be regarded as especially tragic when we think of what he might have written if he had reached the age of 88 like his compatriot Giuseppe Verdi. Giving a similar example of Keats who died at 24 and Tolstoy who died at 82, Nagel argues that we cannot compare the tragedy of death by measuring the quantity of experience. Although human beings have natural limits to their lifespan which usually does not exceed a hundred years, we always define our existence as an essentially open-ended future.¹⁴ There is no natural limit, argues Nagel, of the experience that we can have. Therefore, every death at every age is a misfortune for its subject (the dead person) since the tragedy concerns the *impossibility of the continuation of life*, and not the amount of experiences left to experience or just experienced. Taking into account this point of view, Elina’s death at 337 was a misfortune. It may only seem that it was not because an average person reaches 80, but if people lived 1000 years, her death at 337 would seem tragic too.

The only problem with this argumentation is that it does not take into account that the possible continuation of life is not an absolute positive value, so death as the impossibility of continuing life cannot be regarded as an absolute evil, as Nagel maintains. We can imagine that there are some people who feel satisfied and fulfilled with what they have already achieved in their life and are not frightened of death. There can be people who grew old and became tired with new experiences, who have lost their curiosity for life and who have nothing more to achieve and wait for death. There can be people who have nothing to live for and who are longing for death. There can also be some who want to sacrifice their lives for some higher values and they would choose death by themselves. In all these situations, the fear of death is overcome *by the secondary rationalization which gives death its meaning*. Death can be desirable for us in some situations and for some special reasons. It could transpire that it would be better for us to die than to continue our life in some circumstances yet we cannot say that death is something good as such, but only that possibility of continuing is not always the highest value.

Of course, most of us are never ready for any kind of death – as the words of one prayer say: “Lord, I am ready to follow you when you call me, but not this night.”¹⁵ Every night is the present night for us, thus every night (every hour, every minute and every second) we could ask to postpone the moment of death. However, even if we have a fear of some kind of death, of the consequences of death or its circumstances, we know what we are frightened of (the subject of our fear is specified) and therefore we can challenge it. Our fear keeps us ready

¹³ T. Nagel, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁵ See J. Améry, *O starzeniu się. Bunt i rezygnacja (Über das Altern. Revolt und Resignation. Hand an sich legen. Diskurs über den Freitod)*, B. Baran (trans.), Warszawa 2007, p. 130.

to fight – we can overcome many illnesses, we can avoid many causes of sudden death by being aware and avoiding risks. Finally, we are supported in our fight by medicine that can prevent many causes of early death and reduce pain.

We can try to challenge death (e.g. we can survive a serious accident) but we cannot try to challenge mortality (the fact that we will die one day). Mortality is a natural condition of the human race as well as of all species that belong to the so-called animate nature. Nevertheless, consciousness of mortality can make us anxious. It brings us from the level of fear to the level of anxiety, since death is something that is unknown and unexperienced by us (something that cannot be known or experienced). At this level we are neither afraid of having no possibility of experience, nor of the state of having no experience (which could be the same as the state of unconsciousness which is not seen as bad as death) but we are afraid of *the fact of the passing* of everything that is alive. Every minute of our life passes away just as everything that can be valuable for us in our life vanishes and cannot be held forever. The essence of the feeling is expressed by Macbeth in his fabulous speech:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
 Creepes in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last Syllable of Recorded time:
 And all our yesterdayes, haue lighted Fooles
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, breefe Candle,
 Life's but a walking Shadow, a poore Player,
 That struts and frets his houre vpon the Stage,
 And then is heard no more. It is a Tale
 Told by an Ideot, full of sound and fury
 Signifying nothing,
 (William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 5, 19–28)¹⁶

Macbeth is not talking about “the misfortune of the impossibility of continuing life,” he goes much deeper by setting the question of the sense of life and death. To shed more light on the problem, we can distinguish, after Paul Tillich, three main types of existential anxiety that human beings experience: anxiety of fate and death; anxiety of guilt and condemnation; anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness.¹⁷ These three types of anxiety that may overlap each other are present with different intensity in our lives – usually one kind of anxiety is dominant over the other ones. Tillich argues that his distinction corresponds with different periods of time in human history, where at the beginning people were mostly anxious of losing life. In the further period of our history, the anxiety of losing life was replaced by the anxiety of condemnation. Finally, in our times, the deepest anxiety seems to be *the anxiety of absurdity (the lack of sense and meaning of everything in the world and in our life)*. However, all types of existential anxiety mentioned above concern dealing with the same problem – the sense of death. Existential anxiety in all its kinds can only be overcome by *the primary rationalization of death, i.e. by searching for its sense*. If we fail to find any sense

¹⁶ W. Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of Macbeth*, The Project Gutenberg's Etext of Shakespeare's First Folio, <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/0ws3410.txt>

¹⁷ P. Tillich, *op.cit.*, p. 46 ff.

of death we will fall into despair of emptiness and non-being which is something unimaginable (something that we cannot imagine). Such despair has no subject since emptiness and non-being are not subjects, nothing is not “unknown something” but a contradiction to something.¹⁸

Deconstruction and marginalization of death

When we refuse to take any metaphysical settlement that would give us a more or less convincing primary rationalization of death we seem to be completely lost. Nevertheless, people in our “disenchanted” world, using the phrase of Max Weber, do not fall into despair. Why? The answer is quite clear when we look at the attitude to the phenomena of death in our modern western culture. There are two characteristic, tightly connected features of the attitude to death in our times: (1) death is being challenged by scientific methods and (2) the consciousness of mortality is being suppressed or displaced by our culture. Both methods fail to challenge the problem of death since both of them express our helplessness towards mortality and are rather the ways of escaping from the problem than overcoming it. Let me explain it more closely.

New achievements in such areas as molecular biology and genetics are very advanced in the prolongation of life and gerontology, the study of ageing. This research is mainly focused on increasing life expectancy by challenging the biochemical processes of ageing. New medical research increases both the quantity and quality of life and many people are able to expect not only longer but also more healthy and active lives.¹⁹ Since scientific efforts cannot overcome death, all scientific aspirations are aimed at making death predictable and to some extent preventable. Science failed to bring immortality to people but it tries to challenge death by taming it with medical and biological explanations that is a process called by Zygmunt Bauman “the deconstruction of death.”²⁰ The modern *decon-*

¹⁸ Non-being can be understood, according to Aristotle, in four different ways: as contradiction to being (radical opposition, nothingness); as lack of being; as differential opposition (non-being means that something is not being but *is* something else); as relative opposition (non-being is conditioned by being and on the contrary), W. Stróżewski, *Ontologia (Ontology)*, Kraków 2003, p. 171 ff.; *idem, Istnienie i sens (Being and Sense)*, Kraków 2005, p. 424 ff.

¹⁹ Of course, it concerns only people who had the luck to be born in rich and highly developed parts of the world. The level of mortality, especially child mortality, varies to a great extent in different parts of the world. According to the United Nations Human Development Report, 10.7 million children every year do not reach their fifth birthday; today someone living in Zambia has less chance of reaching the age of 30 than someone born in England in 1840; somebody born in Burkina Faso can expect to live 35 years fewer than somebody born in Japan, and somebody born in India can expect to live 14 years fewer than somebody born in the USA (Human Development Report 2005, pp. 3–25, <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/>). Thus, you cannot expect neither similar quantity, nor quality of life among all the inhabitants of our world. As Jean Améry accurately notices, “if we are all equal in death,” it does not mean that “we are equal in dying” (J. Améry, *op.cit.*, pp. 114–115).

²⁰ Z. Bauman, *Śmierć i nieśmiertelność. O wielości strategii życia (Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies)*, N. Leśniewski (trans.), Warszawa 1998, p. 156 ff.

struction of death is aimed at making this phenomena absolutely explicable, comprehensible, deprived of any mysteriousness and limited to a natural, biological act. The scientific efforts of our times have replaced the primary metaphysical rationalization of death with naturalistic rationalization. This turn from metaphysics to science in search for reliable, certain and universal answers also means a change of discourse from a justificatory to an explanatory one. Our times are the times of belief in science and technological efficiency in transforming nature and human beings. People's deepest desire is to have control over nature and human life from beginning to end, including decisions about both. That what cannot be fully controlled is seen as a failure. Illnesses, ageing and death – all are seen as human failures in challenging nature, all are burdens for the society which hides them away from the public consciousness.

Therefore, the tendency of naturalizing death is supported by another strong tendency of our times – *marginalizing death*, isolating it and keeping far from people's life. Philippe Ariès describes this social phenomena of our times in the last chapter of the history of attitudes to death and dying, one of his major works. The title of the chapter is "Death the other way round" and it describes how death from a social, public event became something private and embarrassing in our times. In previous times, everybody died publicly, the death of an individual was a tragedy for the whole community. In modern times, death became exiled from a society and "in a city everything goes on just as nobody were dying", writes Ariès.²¹ People have hidden death behind the closed doors of hospitals. Today, people usually die in much more convenient and painless ways but more often in loneliness and unconsciousness. Of course, everybody dies alone – on her own account, nobody can replace her in her dying – but whether people face it supported by their loved ones or in complete loneliness constitutes a considerable difference.²² People have developed, as Ariès writes, a new model of death – medicalised death and a new style of dying – in hospitals. It is quite characteristic that modern people have not developed any significant symbol of death as in former times.²³ The medical model determines our understanding of death, seen as a failure, negligence, as business lost.²⁴

The most interesting thing is that death has lost its natural meaning in our times. There is no such a thing as *natural death* any more. Each death is a failure of medicine, an external and radical interruption of our natural process of living. Our contemporary understanding of death is based (as with the whole of modern science) on Descartes' mechanistic theory of a life, as Max Scheler notices. The theory says that death is the "termination of phenomena of consciousness, produced by an external cause destroying bodily mechanism."²⁵ In former times, death was understood in terms other than the physical, it was understood

²¹ P. Ariès, *Człowiek i śmierć (L'Homme Devant la Mort)*, E. Bąkowska (trans.), Warszawa 1989, p. 550.

²² Research results suggest that only one fourth of bereaved people were present when their close relatives were dying (*ibidem*, p. 560).

²³ M. Scheler, *Cierpienie, śmierć, dalsze życie (Vom Sinns des Leidens. Vom Verrat der Freude. Tod und Fortleben)*, A. Węgrzycki (trans.), Warszawa 1994, p. 96.

²⁴ P. Ariès, *op.cit.*, p. 575.

²⁵ M. Scheler, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

as something like a fading or an expiring because of the exhaustion of internal powers. Some ancient philosophers, such as Plato, also tried to use such biological terms in describing physical movement, an unsuccessful enterprise, and yet now, by contrast, one uses physical terms to explain biological death. It results in the situation that one sees each death just as a death caused by a shot from a pistol. Each death is unnatural, each death is an externally caused disruption of our bodily functions. It brings about confusion and is the main reason for today's controversies about the definition of death. The main point of discussion is which processes have to be terminated to become dead.²⁶ Death examined in scientific research became a complexity of different, separate processes (death of brain, death of heart and other organs can be distinguished) that can be, to a certain degree, technically manipulated.

The deconstruction of death makes it trivial and forces people to concentrate on everything that helps us forget about its irrationality, that which cannot be covered by scientific research. Contemporary societies are constructed in a utilitarian manner, aimed at maximizing our preferences which are supposed to bring happiness, while minimizing misfortune and suffering. Such a utilitarian idea is based on consequential and end-result (teleological) reasoning but, actually, the idea of maximization is an aim itself. Thus, it is end-result thinking but without a specified end. The main motive of people's conduct is the idea of the endless maximization of preferences. Therefore, life is understood, by such thinkers as Nagel, as an open-ended plan which consists of an unlimited scope of possibilities. A death which deprives us of further possibilities is an irrational absolute cut-off point which breaks up the continuity of our life and is thus an absolute evil.

Contemporary culture has displaced a consciousness of mortality with a mere knowledge of mortality based on a simple inductive judgment²⁷: "(1) Socrates died; (2) X, Y (...) Z died; (3) all people are mortal." We know the fact of the mortality of human beings and therefore we know that we will also die but knowing the fact of human mortality is something completely different from an intuition "I will die." The fact that human beings are mortal is something natural, while an intuition of death is not, as Leszek Kołakowski points out.²⁸ Nobody expressed it better than Leo Tolstoy in his magnificent and moving novel entitled *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Ivan Ilych knew that he was dying, nevertheless "he could not grasp it." He was familiar with the frequently used logical syllogism: "»Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortak." This "had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself" since he was not an abstract mortal man, he was a separate being, Vanya, who had his own experiences, memories, emotions and thoughts and it *simply could not be true for him that he ought to die*.²⁹

²⁶ See about it S.J. Youngner, R.M. Arnold, R. Schapiro (eds.), *The Definition of Death. Contemporary Controversies*, The John Hopkins University Press, London 1999.

²⁷ See M. Scheler, *op.cit.*, p. 97.

²⁸ L. Kołakowski, *Bóg nam nic nie jest dłużny. Krótka uwaga o religii Pascala i o duchu jansenizmu (God Owes Us Nothing. Short Remark on Pascal's Religion and the Spirit of Jansenism)*, I. Kania (trans.), Znak, Kraków 1994, p. 161.

²⁹ L. Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, trans. by Louise and Aylmer Maude, ReaderWorks, available online.

Consciousness of mortality – sense of death and meaning of life reconstructed

Let me now present some arguments showing the significance of death as a part of human condition that can help us understand why rebuilding a deep consciousness of mortality in our culture is required.

1. Life: development and diversification

Why do people die? Actually, scientists have no good answer as far as the evolutionary reasons for the ageing of human cells are concerned. There are only speculations. One of them says that human cells age and die because if it were not so, there would be no exchange of cells, no diversity and therefore no development in nature would be possible, the same being the case for the development of global civilization and culture. The necessary conditions of each kind of development are the following two contradictory factors: *cooperation* (which leads to unification) and *diversity*, as Lévi-Strauss writes.³⁰ On the one hand, people need to cooperate with each other to survive and develop civilisation yet to stimulate civilisation's progress people need diversification. The more diverse the players, the more profitable the cooperation. However, each cooperation brings about the unification of the subject of cooperation, so the longer parties cooperate, the less profitable it would be. Thus, if people's lives were immortal, the cooperation would be extended into infinity and would result with absolutely unity and therefore stagnation. If there were no death, there would be also no procreation which is the natural answer to death. Both mortality and natality, using the phrase of Hannah Arendt, are two sides of the same coin that complement one another. Natality and mortality are the most important strategies of diversification that result in the generation of new levels of diversity and make any human development possible. Each person that is born and dies is different, absolutely unique, thus making our world so valuable and our life so intense. This is the first reason which makes death a necessary part of life. As Scheler says, "death is a 'sacrifice' which organic individuals must suffer with regard to the reproduction of species."³¹

2. Being alive

Everything that lives dies. Animate beings are those beings that can die in contrast to inanimate (inorganic) parts of nature such as stones, mountains, rivers and wind. Inanimate things can also vanish or end but the difference is that their vanishing is relative, not absolute as with dying. The vanishing of inanimate beings is relative to coming into being of something else, writes Scheler and adds: "death represents itself as absolute vanishing of something that cannot be

³⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strukturalna II (Anthropologie structurale deux)*, M. Falski (trans.), Wydawnictwo KR, Warszawa 2001, pp. 384–388.

³¹ M. Scheler, *op.cit.*, p. 10; see also p. 15.

considered in any way as origination of something different.”³² People die and people are born but there are not the same or replicable beings, somebody’s life is not a mere continuation of life of her ascendants. Nobody has to die to make room for a new human being in the world. We do not sacrifice our life for the lives of those to come in the future. The idea of mortality is a necessary condition of natality in the meaning of sacrifice of individual life for the life of species. As Max Scheler stresses: “an absolute phenomenon of death is connected with an essence of the animate”. Death belongs to an essence of life. Therefore we cannot understand dying as being defeated by nature, dying is a part of nature to which we all belong as organic, animate beings. Dying is the essence of our being.

3. Being in time

Nagel writes that being alive means having the possibility to do certain things, to experience both bad and good things. However, we have to take into account that doing and experiencing is not a state but a process which is situated in time just as human beings are. Each experience and life activity is directed into changes and all changes depend on time and its flow. The flow of time determines our life which is passing away with every moment we experience. Scheler writes that “The essence of each life is its direction on death.”³³ Human beings understand their life as not only being in time but also as being in a specified period of time which has its unspecified (open, unknown) end. Whatever we plan in our life we consider it in time, our whole life and its certain rhythm is determined by the fact that we live in time, not in the present.³⁴ It means that we can experience new things and that the events we have experienced are passing. Our experiences are not stuck into us as nails are in a wall (luckily!) and we are not stuck in our experiences. Our life is one of permanent change and movement which presupposes dying and death. Human beings are beings in time which means that they are mortal beings.

4. Meaning of the life and identity

If we want to understand what a human being is, we have to accept her mortality. Yet this acceptance means that we have to search for its rationalisation in giving sense to someone’s death one is also giving a meaning to her life. As Scheler says, death cannot be understood as some external frames to a picture of our life.³⁵ These are frames that are the part of the picture. Thus, to see the whole picture and to be able to understand its meaning we have to see it with its frames. Without them, the picture remains incomplete. Of course, it does not mean that we do not feel our own life as an integral thing, a totality and that only other people can see our life as a wholeness after our death. On the con-

³² *Ibidem*, p. 87.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

³⁴ See V. Jankélévitch, *op.cit.*, p. 21

³⁵ M. Scheler, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

trary, it means that having the consciousness of our own mortality (not only of the fact of natural mortality of human beings, but intuition of our own death), we can understand our being as an entire life, as some kind of unity placed in time. Our life is an entire unity in each moment since it is closed in time, however, we do not know when exactly it will end. Contemporary people have lost their feeling of unity and the entirety of their lives since they do not see their life in the perspective of death. They rather prefer to see their lives as a never-ending process of the maximization of their preferences or a set of different, separate experiences without any natural limit. But only passing and death can make each moment of our life unique and valuable. If we were not able to place our life and experiences in a certain time, there would be no continuity. Without frames of death, our picture of life and of ourselves disintegrates and falls to pieces. Only one's own death makes one's own life picture complete, and each moment of her life unrepeatable and meaningful part of the whole. Death determines the understanding of our own life and of ourselves, it shapes our identity. Somebody's love and death are the deepest and most moving experience we can have since they both give us truth, the truth about human beings. Thus, death should be always one's own death that results from each moment of one's own life and from the entire life. Nobody expressed this more insightfully than Rainer Maria Rilke in his love poem to God:

O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod.
 Das Sterben, das aus jenem Leben geht,
 darin er Liebe hatte, Sinn und Not
 (R.M. Rilke, *O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod*, 15.4.1903, Viareggio)³⁶

5. Freedom, happiness and a definite loss

Let me now turn to the question of whether death limits our freedom. One may argue that it does, on the grounds that it limits the number of situations in which we can choose among various alternatives. However, I find this argument unconvincing. I think that if we were immortal and therefore if we could repeat our choices an infinite number of times, these choices would be deprived of any tragic element, that is to say: *we would not have to sacrifice one alternative for the sake of another, as all the alternatives would be realizable in a more or less distant future*. In my view, this element of sacrifice is an important aspect of freedom: without this element, it would stop being the value as we know it.

However, on the other hand, one may question if anybody may really enjoy something that one has to inevitably lose. There are three possible ways of an approach to happiness: (1) one enjoys happiness, not being aware that she can lose it; (2) one enjoys happiness but already being aware that she can lose it; (3) one cannot enjoy happiness anymore because the consciousness of the loss of it is so

³⁶ "Oh Lord, award to each his fitting death:
 a dying that distills his very life
 with all its drive and love and breath,"
 trans. by Walter A. Aue (<http://myweb.dal.ca/waue/Trans/Rilke-Stunden.html>).

intense that it makes happiness impossible. These three approaches to happiness can be generally assigned to three periods in our life. The first one is childhood when one can enjoy happiness without taking into account that this happiness is something very fragile and short-lived. However, in this time we are not fully conscious about what we experience (that this is happiness that we feel) and we are not conscious about a real value of this happiness. To be able to estimate fully the value of happiness, we must experience its loss or at least the possibility of its loss. We know how much something is worth when we know or can imagine how it would be if we were deprived of what we value. How could we appreciate youth if we were not to lose it? How could we say that life has such a great value if it were impossible to lose it and if we were keeping it without any special effort? Human beings alone are probably the only ones amongst all animals who are fully conscious about their mortality, the temporality of the existence and the passing away of all of the material things in the world. Other animals live in a permanent now and one may say, after Friedrich Nietzsche, that they are happy because they do not know that they are approaching death with each second of their life. However, is it a state of happiness that would satisfy all of us? I think that most of us would choose conscious life at all costs. Of course, there are some unhappy or sometimes deeply disturbed people who cannot enjoy something when prevented by their consciousness of its inevitable loss. Yet if there would be no pain, no death or no consciousness of any loss, there would be no place for anything we value in our life. There would be no love without pain and death as Scheler writes.³⁷ *Brave New World*, described in the brilliant book by Aldous Huxley, seems to be a very happy place where no one suffers, but this is also a place deprived of the deepest human feelings and emotions. This brings one of the heroes of the book, the Savage, to revolt – claiming “the right to be unhappy.”³⁸

6. Eternity

We would not be able to understand the human condition and our lives without death and the idea of time passing. It brings us to the question of what one can then mean by eternity. “The first condition of life after death is death itself,”³⁹

³⁷ M. Scheler, *op.cit.*, p. 18. See also J. Ratzinger, *Śmierć i życie wieczne (Eschatologie – Tod und ewiges Leben)*, M. Węclawski (trans.), Warszawa 2005, p. 92 ff.

³⁸ I quote here the whole passage of this magnificent book where the Savage speaks to the Mustapha Mond, one of the Resident World Controllers:

“I don’t want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.”

“In fact,” said Mustapha Mond, “you’re claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“All right then,” said the Savage defiantly, “I’m claiming the right to be unhappy.”

“Not to mention the right to grow old and ugly and impotent; the right to have syphilis and cancer; the right to have too little to eat; the right to be lousy; the right to live in constant apprehension of what may happen tomorrow; the right to catch typhoid; the right to be tortured by unspeakable pains of every kind.” There was a long silence.

“I claim them all,” said the Savage at last.”

(<http://www.hedweb.com/huxley/bnw/seventeen.html>).

³⁹ M. Scheler, *op.cit.*, p. 105.

Scheler writes. When people consider the idea of eternal life, such an eternity cannot be understood as life without end, but rather as a completely different kind of life which cannot be measured in time, existence beyond time. Furthermore, as Wittgenstein says: "Wenn man unter Ewigkeit nicht unendliche Zeitdauer, sondern Unzeitlichkeit versteht, dann lebt der ewig, der in der Gegenwart lebt."⁴⁰ In other words, one can understand eternity as the eternal present which means being beyond past, present and future, and knowing no passing of time. It means that when we think of eternal life we do not want to keep our life with all its activities forever, the only thing that we are sometimes longing for is to keep the particular moments of our life or to make them last forever. How unfortunate are those who have no such moments to which they can call in Faust's words: "Verweile doch! Du bist so schön!..."⁴¹ These are the moments of joy about which Nietzsche sings in his drunken song: "Lust will aller Dinge Ewigkeit, will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!"⁴²

Concluding remarks

Of course, it is difficult to agree with Epicurus or Cicero claims that death is a good thing or at least not a bad thing since it does not make us suffer when it comes. Death remains a bad thing since it brings to us the feeling of emptiness that cannot be filled by any speculation. It also makes us frustrated by showing how vulnerable our human existence is (the human being is "a *thinking reed*" as Pascal says). Death is a tragedy, but a significant tragedy which poses a significant question of its sense and which gives a special meaning to life. Death is an important source experience of our life that shapes our identities and makes our lives meaningful in each moment that cannot be repeated any more. Living immortally, people would have no strong motivation to pursue their life projects, to keep relationships, to love, to forgive or to hate etc. – immortality results in absolute, never-ending boredom. It would also result in complete unification and stagnation, making any natural and cultural development impossible. Being alive means to be mortal and to pass on. To live is to experience and act and this can be possible only in the frames of time. Life can be fully understood only within its mortal frames, and death should be understood as something that results from life. It gives us space for freedom and makes our free choices significant. Consciousness of death and any kind of inevitable loss in our life makes our life

⁴⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *op.cit.*, 6.4311, p. 109, in English: "If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present," <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-h/5740-h.htm>

⁴¹ "Ach, still delay – though art so fair!" – translated into English by Bayard Taylor (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14591/14591-h/14591-h.htm>)

⁴² F. Nietzsche, G. Colli, M. Montinari (Hrsg.), *Also sprach Zarathustra, Kritische Studienausgabe*, de Gruyter, Berlin 1999, p. 403. "Joys want the eternity of ALL things, they WANT DEEP, PROFOUND ETERNITY!" – trans. into English by T. Common: (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm#2H_4_0087).

valuable and brings us full enjoyment. The rare moments of full enjoyment – our joys – are those ones that are worth keeping forever, those that deserve eternity.

If we accept the significance of death as a condition of life, we cannot reject the search for its primary rationalization which cannot be replaced with any naturalistic explanation. Even if we are unable to find absolute and certain answers, we cannot stop asking. Death is not a secret that has to be discovered, as Jankélévitch says, it is a mystery. One could add, quoting Kołakowski: “If we could have answered this, our world would have resembled a multiplication table for a long time. And then you would have seen how much worse it would have been than what we have.”⁴³

⁴³ L. Kołakowski, *Klucz niebieski albo Opowieści budujące z historii świętej zebrane ku pouczeniu i przestrodze* (*The Key to Heaven or Underpinning Stories for Admonition and Warning*), Warszawa 1965, p. 104.